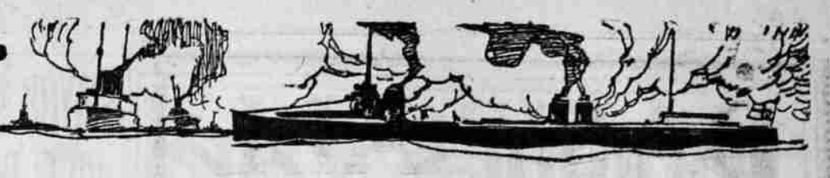
1917?

by Edwin Balmer



Herewith is presented the twelfth installment of a fiction serial dealing with what might happen should European powers, after they had settled their own differences, wage war upon the United States. The author, one of the best fiction writers in the country, has based his story upon a thorough understanding of military, naval, and internal conditions in the United States and upon a sound knowledge of military and economic history. The story will cause you to realize the critical situation in which this country and you, your neighbors, and your family are placed by the let-well-enough-alone attitude of the pacifists.

SYNOPSIS.

In Elgin, Ill., live the Ashby family, consisting of Nathan Ashby, owner of the Ashby Brass company, and his wife; a daughter, Nellie, married to Bob Wendell, a navy lieutenant; and Jim Ashby, a son, engaged to Agnes Ware. Nathan Ashby is the archtype of pacifist, deaf to the warnings of impending danger to America. Almost out of a clear sky news is received that the United States scout cruiser Salem, proceeding against orders, in the North Atlantic has encountered the fleet of the league of former European enemies and has been sunk, a deliberate act of war. Bob is recalled to Newport News. Spies are discovered in the Ashby works, and evidence of a league of spies that swarm the country and are even enlisted in the army is held by Jim Ashby, who for a time is held prisoner in one of the spies' rendezvous in a fashionable residence in Chicago. Jim after his adventure returns to Elgin. War is on and Jim has signified his intention to enlist. Bob arrives in Newport News to find that enemy aeroplanes have been dropping bombs around the arsenal and on the deck of the Arizona, killing a number of men. The United States army aeroplanes are inadequate against the highly specialized air craft divisions of the enemy. With the Arizona's personnel cut down to man mine planters and destroyers, Bob is appointed second divisional officer and the dreadnaught steams out for Hampton Roads and to engage the enemy ships that are bombarding the coast towns. It is the enemy's plan to trap the American fleet into reach of the submarines. They almost succeed, but owing to the heavy fire from American ships have to abandon the plan and flee, not, however, without first sinking one of the American destroyers. Bob learns that two of the regent's ships have been badly damaged, one of them aground off Hatteras. The second engagement is of greater magnitude. The enemy fights the American fleet in the proportion of two to one. Yet neither seems to have a great advantage. The Arizona, Bob's ship, is disabled and sinking.

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BUT there was really no use firing now. The Arizona listed so badly that the guns coud not be elevated to the target.

A salvo of shells—those awful, fiendish shells sent on signal from the aeroplanes—struck all in a bunch somewhere below, and a magazine aft blew up; or perhaps it was boilers first. Anyway, the Arizona was going down fast. As she went there was no escape from the turret through the handling room; instead Holt was helping pull up Wayne and his men into the turret. There was only the small, heavy steel door which let out the back of the turret to the deck. It was found jammed, as Bob ordered it opened; so some of the men cursed and others cried that they didn't want to get out; and some one yelled to crawl out through the guns and two of the men tried it. Then the door opened and Bob stood back to order his men out ahead of him; but—the ship was going down then—Holt seized Bob about the waist and shoved him through the door, and outside some one else grabbed him and swam with him away from the ship.

It was the destroyer Wainwright which picked up Bob and the sailor who swam with him; the destroyer had dashed in to try to find the admiral in the water near where the Idaho sank. For the enemy was having troubles himself at that instant. The Xerxes, which had been observed to be listing for some time, was slipping down after the Idaho to the bottom, and the Floron had turned over and was floating keel to the sky; the Trajan, very low at the stem, was being taken in tow by another ship; and two of the Pharaohs—so men on the Wainwright said—must soon sink.

Guns were still rumbling down the column, four of the American ships still were fighting; they finished two more of the Pharaohs before they drifted, like the rest of the silenced ships, waterlogged hulks; for the Thors and the Zeus ships, which long before had beaten the Vermonts and the Connecticuts, closed in and finished the task of the Pharaohs.

Bob Wendell stood on the trembling deck of the Wainwright surrounded by bright eyed, tense lipped, exhausted men. One of the battle cruisers of the regent and one of the destroyers seemed to observe the Wainwright and that it was escaping from the battle. The destroyer gave chase. Bob Wendell watched the other destroyer dully; his head drooped and he closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and roused himself; he was seeing things which made him think again—Nellie and then Garry's little boy with the straw hat with the "U. S. S. Arizona" ribbon. Hmm.

"The radio room is hearing from the shore," some one said. "They want to know the result of the battle."

"The result."

"The official press bureau announces," said the bulletin pasted to the board before the office of the Elgin News, "that the American fleet has inflicted heavy losses upon the enemy but has also suffered severely. American vessels are retiring toward New York."

That was the sole official communication authorized by the administration that night; but, in spite of the administration, the entire truth was spread through the nation with marvelous swiftness. How it spread no one could say—it was spread by secret codes telegraphed as ordinary messages; it was spread by private wireless plants operated in secret places by the agents of the enemy who, perhaps, learned the result of the battle directly from the radios of the victorious ships. However the news was spread. Nellie Wendell heard the facts repeated from one to another about her as she stood before the newspaper office, staring up at the few false lines of official "information."

"We're licked, they say! . . . Who says so? . . . I don't know; but, by God, they say the Regent's sunk our fleet! . . . That can't be so! Why, we had the best navy of its size in the world! Why, the fleet us, just the same; and they knew they were lying. Nellie, when I was talking to those arms people down east they spoke of that battle just as if it had happened and we already were beaten. They knew what those liars at Washington were doing; they were sending out Bob and the rest of the boys to—to get it! Those damned politicians murdered those boys—that's the plain truth of it—and to try to save their own cowardly hides! The scoundrels who are responsible ought to be hung! They knew the fleet wasn't strong enough and it wasn't fit, but they'd told the country it was; and rather than stand up now before the people and admit they'd been lying all the time they sent Bob and the rest of those boys out to try to make good their lie! And now they've got the army, and Jim's in the army. Well, by God, they won't do that to the army!"

Many millions of others besides Nathan Ashby were being shocked to that awakening that night. There were only thirty or forty thousand homes in the nation where women, like Nellie Wendell, waited that night with

. . . But, I tell you, they're gone! I got it straight. They're all sunk—the Idaho, the Arizona, the Pennsylvania, and——"

Nellie turned and faced the man who was speaking. "Please," she requested him quietly, "please tell me how you heard that and—and anything else you know!"

The man's eyes softened as they gazed at hers; he took off his hat. "What do you mean, Miss?"

"You said our ships—particularly the Arizona—were sunk. How did you hear that?"

"Why—why, I just heard it, Miss. Every one's saying it. I just heard it."

And, as she challenged others, that was all Nellie could learn that evening as she waited before the bulletin upon which remained posted the official lie from Washington. She telephoned several times to her father's house; and, at last, when it was evident that no more definite news was to be given out that night, she consented to return home. It was

—tore the report from his hands and struck him in the face with it.

there, of course, that she would hear from the navy department if the department was telegraphing personal information to the wives of the officers who had been in battle. But no word came during the evening except the report, repeated and repeated again, that the Americans had been beaten; that their ships were captured or sunk—and that the Arizona was one definitely known to be sunk. Only late in the night, as she lay on the couch in the living room listening—ever listening—for the telephone bell or the sound of a messenger's bicycle on the gravel path, the half vision, half dream which she had told to Bob came back and showed him very clearly. He was with her and their baby was born; they were beside the road and—— It vanished as it came, instantly and without warning, and Nellie was sitting up, gasping and trembling in fear. For, though she could not define to herself what it was, there was something in the vision which struck terror to her as never before; Bob was with her, but——

She started up to her feet. A motor car was approaching the house and slowing. Nellie ran into the hall. Her father came from the car. He was carrying his portmanteau—he had just arrived from Chicago after his return from the east. He dropped his traveling bag as he saw Nellie and he put a great arm about her pityingly.

"So you've heard?" he said.

"What have you heard, father?" she begged him. "Please tell me everything!"

"We're beaten at sea; you know that?"

"Yes; I know that."

"Our fleet's gone, they say!" he iterated incredulously. "It's gone, Nellie—they say our fleet's gone!"

"Yes; I heard them. All the important ships, which were in the fight, are captured or sunk. They say the Arizona is one of the ships sunk."

"So you've heard that!"

"Yes, father."

"Any—anything else, little girl?"

"About Bob? Have you, father?"

"No," he said, patting her. "No." Then she was conscious that a spasm of anger—of rage, violent and excessive—was shaking him as he tried to control himself.

"What is it, father?"

Nathan Ashby stood back from his daughter. "They told us the fleet was fit—those damned, lying politicians! O, part of it was my fault, for I wanted to believe 'em—we did, men like me all over the nation! We wanted to believe 'em, so we did. But they lied to trembling hearts for word of the survivors of the fleet; there were only thirty or forty thousand homes where men like Nathan Ashby were rising with rage at realization that the administration, in desperate venture to save the "face," had sent a son or brother to vain death; but through millions of homes was spreading the sense that the navy had been betrayed and that the people, lied to and tricked, now were exposed to the horrors of invasion. Of all the navy of the United States there remained only a few cruisers and obsolete battleships, a score of destroyers, and some of the submarines to aid in harbor defense here and there and, perhaps, to attempt an occasional weak raid. The navy was gone; but the army was in the making, and, throughout the nation, more than a million men and boys already were enrolled—that took one man from every score of homes and made the army the closest and most immediate anxiety of every one. So, that night, the disorders which had seized the great industrial cities during the days before spread to Washington, and a mob marched up Pennsylvania avenue and was kept back from the capitol only by a line of soldiers with bayonets fixed. Dispersed again and again, the mob reformed and clamored for the president—howled for the right to see the president and demand of him explanation of what he had done and word of what he was now to do. So they swarmed near enough to the White House for their tumult to be heard in the room where the president was with his advisors in all night session.

Except for one man the group was identical with that which had been in the cabinet room when the president ordered the fleet to battle; the man who had been present then, but who was absent now, was the admiral who had commanded the American fleet in the great battle. So far as information went—and the enemy did not boast of his capture—he had been lost when his flagship, the Idaho, succumbed to the combined fire of the Trajan and the Xerxes. The navy was represented in this council, therefore, only by Admiral Poe.

He sat for a while very white and grim and with his gray eyes glittering, while the secretary of the navy blustered through his report of the defeat and the "failure of the fleet" to realise expectations; then suddenly the admiral was upon his feet.

"Stop!" he ordered. "If you have not shame enough to resign and then hang yourself you shall not further insult the men you murdered." And for a moment the admiral—he had had two sons with the fleet—completely lost control of himself. He stepped over and tore the report from the hands of the secretary of the navy and struck him in the face with it; then he hurled the sheets upon the floor.

"Go, now!" Poe commanded him. "Go and pray to God for shame and strength enough to execute yourself. Go, fool, or by the souls of my sons, I'll—"

The secretary of the navy fled. Poe watched him till the door closed behind him; then the admiral turned back to the president and the others. He gazed at them silently and they remained silent until he relapsed into his seat and his head fell forward and his lips moved as if in prayer.

The president addressed the secretary of war to open the discussion in regard to immediate military dispositions. Gen. Stone, the chief of staff, listened for more than an hour without contributing to the discussion; when a cabinet member counted a battalion as a brigade and enumerated every body of troops as an army corps Stone maintained silence.

Only when every one else had spoken and the president turned to him for comment he arose and spoke curtly and without pretense of patience with the cabinet or with the president.

"Mr. President and gentlemen! The general staff has prepared a plan of operation to meet such a desperate situation as now confronts us. I need scarcely say that—as it is a military plan for the defense of the nation and not a political scheme—it opposes your proposals in every essential. The plan of the general staff promises that—if purely military considerations govern from now on—we have a chance, just a chance, to save the nation. We must expect defeats and enormous loss of property. But if we can keep the enemy from debouching into the country for a month while we take down our arms plants and ship the machinery west and while we give the militia the essential minimum of military and physical training, we may hope for final success; but from this moment every other interest—however momentous—must be subordinate to the plan of defense!"

"Which is?" the president demanded.

The general outlined it briefly, passionlessly, without apology or comment. The president stared, startled; the men of the cabinet gazed at each other. "Impossible!" "It can not be allowed!" "Unthinkable!——"

Stone cut the comments short. "Mr. President, I am here not to argue for this plan, merely to inform you of it before putting it into effect."

The president, very white and trembling in his anger, leaned forward over his table. "You mean by that——"

"Listen!" Stone invited, and crossed to the window and raised the curtain so that the tumult of the mob could be clearly heard. A shot or two sounded, and then the rage of the mob roared louder and came closer.

"Mr. President, the people from whom you derive your power! Do you wish to go to them or have them come to you tonight? Ah, a machine gun! It is firing over their heads now; but do not worry; if they press too hard their demand to hear from you tonight, Mr. President, the machine gun will shot lower and will protect you. The army, you see, is the more loyal; I have given the officers my personal pledge that from tonight military considerations—not political ones—will direct the armed forces of the nation!"

The firing outside ceased and the breeze brought from the tongue of the tumult: "Get the damned politicians! Lynch the liars and murderers! Lynch the damned, murdering montebanks!"

The general leaned across the table toward the president and pushed forward an order for the president to sign. The president drew back from it, then he took up his pen; he hesitated, scratched his name, and shoved the paper from him.

The chief of staff examined the document and straightened. He put the paper in his pocket and drew out another.

"This is the proclamation calling for the second million men which you are to issue tomorrow morning. You observe it is not a call for volunteers. England, having her navy and the armies of France, Belgium, and Russia fighting for her, was able to wait more than a year before enforcing conscription; we cannot wait. You have there the estimate of the number of men of military age, classed by ages. Tomorrow you will call out the classes indicated to report for immediate training and the other classes later, as indicated. Whatever obstacles may arise with congress, I leave them to you to meet. I must return to the general staff at once."

* * *

Thus it was that,, at midnight, a bugle roused Jim Ashby—private in company F of the Twentieth Illinois regiment—from his blanket, where he lay with his fellow recruits on the grass of Grant park. The Twentieth Illinois was one of the new regiments organized from the old Third regiment of the state guard. Consequently it was very short of tents, as well as of equipment of every kind. Only the corporals and sergeants, who had been privates and corporals in the militia, possessed uniforms. Jim's platoon was commanded by Connor, created second lieutenant by ripping the chevrons from his sleeves and sewing straps upon his shoulders. Jim Ashby, like most of the other recruits, wore a brown sack suit, designated as a uniform by a khaki armband. The recruits also had uniform caps and had rifles and cartridge belts and bayonets. Battalions of five other Illinois regiments camped in Grant park, along the lake front of downtown Chicago—something over 4,000 men. There were as many more in Lincoln park; other regiments or battalions were in Jackson park. Altogether there were more than 20,000 militiamen and recruits drilling and conditioning themselves by day in Chicago parks while they waited for their equipment. At night different companies took turn guarding the vitals of the city. Jim had stood guard duty through two nights, with the rest of his company, at the electric plant which supplied most of the city with light and power.

It had never occurred to him till he was stationed as guard at the great plant how very vulnerable a modern city is to the attack of small, reckless bands. A dozen men with dynamite, if they could force their way into that great power building, could throw half the city into darkness and, in addition, could shut off the supply of power from hundreds of the manufacturing plants working day and night on materials suddenly ordered to be supplied to soldiers. A score of men with high explosives could, in a few seconds, blow up the gas tanks and the millions of the city would be without fuel for their stoves—dynamite half a dozen pumping stations and the city would be without water, except that which might be brought in buckets from the lake. The food of the millions likewise was vulnerable, gathered in great depots. The supplies in the pantries of the tenements, the flats, and the houses and in the little, scattered stores would last for less than a week; the reserve supplies lay in great warehouses, elevators, and packing plants, so that a few hundred men might destroy all in a day; and the railroads—they must be always sentineled now at bridge, culvert, and cut, at tunnel, across prairie and plain. It took more than a fourth of the soldiers in Chicago—so Jim guessed; no figures were given out—merely to protect the city from the forays of the regent's spies and the enemy's nationals in the city itself. Indeed, two nights before, every regiment and battalion at Grant park was called out, leaving only a couple of companies to guard the camp.

As the bugles roused the camp now at midnight Jim supposed that it meant more riots, more attacks upon the power plants and the railroads; it was to be expected that the regent's people would be celebrating their sweep at sea. But the orders which followed the bugle call were different from any given before—instead of taking only rifle, bayonet, and ammunition and "doubling" down the boulevard toward the noise of the nearest fighting, the order now was to break camp. Jim rolled his blanket and packed his scant equipment—canteen, knife, fork and spoon, and toilet articles. After his first quick reaction to the call of the bugle he found himself very stiff and weary. Upon the afternoon he had returned from an eighteen hole round of golf and argued with Bob Wendell on the porch—and that was barely a week gone—he would have described himself as having been in perfect physical trim, fit for any test. But even thirty-six holes of golf in an afternoon—with a caddy carrying the clubs—was no preparation for carrying a rifle and 300 rounds of ammunition and a pack on a ten mile practice "hike" with the thermometer 98 in the shade and then digging a tranch, and later—like as not—standing guard with every tired muscle strained and every nerve tense, alert for sign of attack upon a power plant. The soreness in his left arm, where he had received the first hypodermic inoculation against typhoid, did not serve to make him more comfortable. But every one else about was as sore and stiff as he; no one complained.

"Where're we going, do you suppose—to camp about the gas works?'

"Not on your life! Haven't you heard?"

"What?"

"We're going east, they say!"

"East?"

"To New York!"

"We are! Then—the regent's begun landing his troops?"

"Transports off the east end of Long island, they say."

"They are!"

Jim's soreness and weariness suddenly were gone; instead a hot impulse of power and passion stirred through him. It was much more than a rejuvenation of the first excitement of the camp in Chicago and of carrying arms through the streets. The enemy of the United States was landing—or about to land—upon the shores of the country! He was being called, with the rest of his regiment, to oppose them!

"There's been big doings in Washington tonight. Have you heard?"

"Not much."

"Well, we may get it; we probably are going to; but they aren't to stick it to us for nothing like they did with the navy—poor devils."

Jim choked and swallowed. All the evening he had been thinking of Bob and Nellie. Was Bob killed and did Nellie know [illegible] "What's happened in Washington?" he asked.

"They say Stone's in absolute charge."

Some one else cut in eagerly. "And the president calls out a million more men tomorrow!"

"He don't call. He orders. They're going to draft by ages right away; no slackers here, if Stone's bossing!"

The bugle blew again. Bugles answered all about.

"Say, what was that call?"

"That was 'Assembly.'"

"'Twas not. You damned fool, they don't blow assembly when they want——"

"Well, that's 'Boots and Saddles' they're blowing over there in the First cavalry. I know that."

"Hey, sergeant!"

"We're to get in line, boys; over there; column fours!" the sergeant suggested optimistically.

The confusion in the camp became greater and greater. In the week's tireless, intensive drill company F—all raw recruits except the officers and sergeants and corporals who had been promoted from the Third militia regiment—had only passably mastered squad drill. "Form fours!" still brought recruits tripping and tumbling; passable platoon evolutions by daylight were still in the future; and now, in the dark of midnight, a whole battalion—four companies together—was expected to form and march to the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern railroad station and keep from getting mixed up with the other battalions of the Twentieth and with uncounted battalions of other regiments, not to speak of the troops of mounted men who were on the march at the same time. There was a great deal of swearing and there was little light to let any one witness just how had the formation was—and somehow the battalion got started.

"Some troupe traveling with us!" the man marching at Jim's right commented. He was Paddy Kilbane, erstwhile shipping clerk at Sears-Roebuck's and star infielder of their nine; a scout for the Cubs had recommended him just before the Salem located the regent's fleet. If Kilbane was in place, Jim was not; but neither knew who was out of position; but the fact that "Swedy" Swenson marched just behind caused Jim to suspect that both himself and the Irishman belonged elsewhere. Swenson was a large, laconic man—until eight days earlier janitor of an apartment building—who possessed, as his reference which he brought with him stated, a passion for orderliness and precision.

Kilbane continued: "And they must be requiring us bad to start us up so this time of the night. Swedy, me bucko, 'tis a rifle ye're marching with, not a mop, and ye're pokin' me shins. Put it over ye're shoulder like a ball bat; 'twill not drip on ye!"

"Excuse, Mr. Kilbane!" Swenson obliged. "That ben fire bell, hey?"

[TO BE CONTINUED]